

Despite lower numbers, Charleston's Bridge Run should still pack a powerful economic punch

- **By Andrew Miller** apmiller@postandcourier.com
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It's less than 10 days before the 45th annual Cooper River Bridge Run and race director Irv Batten is putting out small fires from North Charleston to Mount Pleasant. He isn't complaining. It's better than the alternative.

"Making sure volunteers have their T-shirts, making sure the fencing is going up and not blocking other businesses in Mount Pleasant is just part of the game," said Batten, who succeeded the late Julian Smith as the director of the event in 2019. "I'm not complaining. It's better to have these problems than not having a race at all. My mentality this close to race day is — what's next on the list."

The 45th annual Cooper River Bridge Run, which since its beginning in 1978 has grown into one of the largest 10-kilometer road races in the U.S. with more than 35,000 runners and walkers, returns to its traditional spring date this year.

The 6.2-mile course from Mount Pleasant across the Ravenel Bridge into downtown Charleston is set to begin at 8 a.m. on April 2. It's been three years since the race was held on its customary spring date. The 2020 event was first postponed, then held virtually due to the coronavirus pandemic. COVID-19 also delayed the 2021 race, pushing it to Sept. 25 from March 28.

“I think by having the Bridge Run back at it’s more traditional springtime date kind of signals that things are getting back to normal,” said Chris Menkel, who owns Fleet Feet running stores in Mount Pleasant and Summerville.

Tourism run

The Southeastern Wildlife Exposition along with Charleston Wine + Food and the Bridge Run mark the kickoff for the spring tourism season in Charleston.

The Bridge Run’s economic impact in a normal year is almost \$33 million with direct local spending usually breaking the \$10 million mark, according to past studies conducted by race organizers.

This past September, the event was limited to a maximum of 25,000 runners and walkers because of the pandemic, well below the usual 35,000 to 40,000 who normally sign up. About 11,800 participants started and finished the course last fall.

There are no COVID restrictions for this year’s race and registration has been steady. Batten expects around 20,000 participants next weekend.

“Our goal was 25,000, and it looks like we’ll be just short of that,” Batten said. “When registration opened up, we had the COVID restrictions in place, and I think that might have given some folks that normally would have participated second thoughts. That and having the last race six months ago probably factored into the registration numbers. Also the number of no-shows will be less than they were in September.”

Despite a lower number of participants, the run should still pack a powerful economic punch for the local economy, said Daniel Guttentag, director of the College of Charleston’s Office of Tourism Analysis.

The effect on the local economy should be twofold. The actual dollars that will flow into the region during the weekend from Bridge Run attendees dining at downtown restaurants, staying at hotels and shopping in local stores will be significant. Then there’s the significance of the “return to normalcy” of getting that and other big events back on the calendar.

“The Bridge Run, the Wine and Food festival and SEWE are huge events,” Guttentag said. “They are very significant as far as economic impact and bringing in visitors to the area. But they also impact the city’s reputation and profile for people across the country. That’s significant as well.”

While the early spring is always a busy time for the hospitality industry in the Lowcountry, the Bridge Run allows hotels to charge higher rates for the weekend. From 2016-19, hotel rates jumped 16 percent during the weekend of the Bridge Run. Occupancy rates were also above 90 percent

“Sixteen percent is a pretty big spike in terms of room rates for one weekend,” Guttentag said. “The Bridge Run brings in a huge number of people. Demand for rooms during that event is very high. Occupancy is pretty much full.” Surveys have shown that runners and walkers who participate in the event have become return visitors and long-term fans of the destination.

“The running community is a very loyal group,” said Kathleen Cartland, executive director of the Charleston Area Sports Commission. “They come back year after year.”

Expo extra

There will be more than 200 vendors selling the latest in running apparel, sun glasses, running shoes and head phones at the Bridge Run Expo on Thursday and Friday at the Charleston Area Convention Center.

“We definitely see a good spike in our sales during the Bridge Run,” said Minkel, who will have 38 booths at the Expo. “Everyone is getting geared up for the race. It’s been a very strong season for us so far.” Minkel is convinced that the race will bounce back to its pre-pandemic popularity.

“I think in the next year or two, participation rates will be back to where it was before,” Minkel said. “There was a huge walking and running boom coming out of the pandemic. People got out and I anticipate that will continue in the coming years.”

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